

Political Socialization and the Role of AASU in Assam

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Abstract: Student activism over issues of vital importance and concerns of Assam isn't a new phenomenon. In this regard the role of student organizations of the state at large and All Assam Students Union in particular stands ahead. The recent anti CAA protest led by the Union had sparked and raised serious attention and gained popularity. In that context, the participation of men and women from both rural and urban sites, of both elite and masses, literate and illiterate provided a new genesis to the movement thus catering to the massive mass concern, emotions and appeal. Yet the different time frames and phases of a movement catering to massive section of people and the political upturn behind the scenes need special dealing and attention. With that the apolitical nature of the organization in itself has been into question due to differed socio-political contestations and contextual appeal. While the citizenship debate has been an unresolved issue in Assam, the active involvement of youth indicates praxis of political socialization and exercise of political rights in ways unique and different from mainland India thus putting eyes for speculation.

Keywords: Youth Politics, AASU, Socialisation, CAB, CAA

Introduction

Student's assimilation into the socio-political processes of any state forms a significant core aspect providing democratic strength and acting as bargaining edifice on behalf of an active civil society. In that pretext, student participation from various parts of the globe and with regards to vital socio, political, economic and various other issues is acknowledged within the ambit of "emerging new social movements". Shifting to the Northeastern context, the region's uncommon administrative, demographic, cultural and traditional rituals or laws have generated a larger share in evoking active civil society grouping and apprehension. Along with that occasional attitude of the center towards the North East region and its people has been in line with alterations, redefinitions, apathy and preclusion. The benefits of developmental plans, policies or programs acquired by the people of the region have never been satisfactory. With that dissent and strife amongst learned strata of the society have widened leading to several social movements from time and again. The formation of the renowned literary club and namely 'Axomiya Bhasar Unnati Sadhini Sabha' in 1888 with the initiative of three eminent personalities of Assam, like Lakshminath Bezbaroah, Hem Chandra Goswami and Chandra Kumar Agarwala marks as the precursor to the formation of foremost student led group not just in the state but also in the northeastern region as a whole. Born initially as a literary group, its long held journey led to formation of All Assam Students Union (AASU) of 1967 which has gained popularity and sustained as an evident part of Assamese empowerment today. The Union from its inception has been engaged with leading several movements including the *Language Movement and Oil Refinery Movement* of 1960, *Medium of Instruction Movement*, 1972 and so on. Nonetheless AASU's dedication and persistent efforts in securing the historic Assam Accord through a six year long led *Assam Agitation* from 1979-1985 provides as the most significant as well as fruitful event of Assam and for the Assamese. From then to its fifty four years of survival and sustenance with previously held stand for indigenous protection and safeguarding identity, rights and belongingness; the structural, constitutional, ideological aspect of the

organization have gone through changes, acclimations and adaptations. Recent context witnesses a proactive role of AASU in dealing with major debates surrounding the state and with specific regards to the emerging CAA question and the NRC controversy. Situated in that context, the ideological nature of the organization claiming itself as apolitical in character has raised serious contemplation too. The political consequences later of which led to formation of another regional party namely Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) in 2020-2021 also gained an occasional momentum however with little consequential rift and value.

This paper is an attempt to understand the nature, intent and ideological positioning of the union with special context to the CAA contention of Assam. The following objectives has been framed in line:

1. To understand the role of AASU in Assam Accord execution 1985 and Post Accord implementation.
2. To analyse the role of AASU in dealing with differing citizenship issues and contestations of Assam with special emphasis on the recent NRC-CAA debate.
3. To draw a general perception with regards to the influential aspect of AASU and evaluate its impact on the organizational strength and functioning of the union.

Methodology

The study is partly empirical, descriptive and historical in nature. Both primary and secondary sources are used for data collection. The Primary data collection relies on tools such interview schedules and questionnaire, both close and open ended in nature. For the secondary sources of data collection various books, articles, journals, government documents, different published and unpublished works are referred. Along with that, audio visual aids like camera, mobile phone voice recorder, and personal diary is maintained to keep track of information, for both basic and further study. During the field visit, both formal and casual approach to communicate with the delegates and common people is maintained respectively. Along with that information collected via social networking sites like Facebook and Whatsapp is also considered for further substitution.

Background

Tracing back to the origin of a movement for citizenship, the role of AASU stands ahead of time and history. The Union's phased perusal from the journey for literary upliftment towards a strife for indigenous identity and political space stands remarkable. The real issue of illegal immigration during the pre-independence period and followed by Partition of Bengal marked a real trouble for the state as land, capital and labor served the prerequisites for the huge influx of immigrants who later searched for settlements in Assam. Although the year of origin still remains contested, the huge influx from East Bengal in Assam both during Pre-independence due to British allowances and after independence due to partition altered the demography of the state and induced fear amongst indigenous people. Still as a major perturbation, the illegal immigration remains an insolvent problem for the state followed by threats to society, culture and economy for the people of the state. Although occasional Chauvinistic appeal has been delegated to such fear, yet untamed records and detailing of real immigrants are not yet been fulfilled even after repeated statist intervention.

The year 1979-1985 marks a significant precursor for the state as the six year long agitation in the name of Assam Movement against illegal immigration led to inclusive participation of masses. With that the transformation from a literary club to All Assam Students Union (AASU) in 1967 helped raise the issue and demand stringent attention from the center marking a major achievement as one the strongest student led socio political mobilization. Prior to that, the Union remained active in drawing the attention of the center towards establishing an oil refinery in Assam instead of Bihar in 1960 and thus marked its strong positioning in the political realm of the state. In addition to that, the strife towards linguistic appeal for Assamese marked a space of significant mention with regards to the functioning of the union. The huge influx of Bengali immigrants who also provoked a threat of replacement to Assamese language, culture and identity remained a big trouble. Keeping that in mind, All Assam Students' Association (then AASA, now AASU) engagement with the state and the center in demanding Assamese as the official language for the state was a huge held success of 1960 although flexibilities in using English and Hindi for official purposes were equally made.

How CAA contention emerged

The post independent India followed by partition of Bengal saw a huge number of immigrants flowing to the North East India especially occupying states of Tripura and Assam for number of reasons and mostly in search of habitat. The reasons of this sudden and rapid inflow from outside were directly connected to the colonial ruling system. Right before Indian Independence, Assam that was a rich colonial province needed huge labor force in industries like Tea. This fore mostly provided an impetus to people from East Bengal to migrate to Assam plains and this trend eventually occupied "Cross border immigration" tendency. Migrants from neighboring countries like Myanmar, Nepal, East Pakistan were not at par and also started to occupy the plains for settlement, while at the same time benefitting the Englishman as labor requisites.

The story from the occupations with the outsiders to their names fitted in the Electoral rolls of post independent India seems interesting on many grounds. The unusual rise of voters in the Mangaldoi Lok Sabha by poll of 1979 as an instance can be highlighted as a major ground in this regard. This demanded sudden attention of the conscious minds and namely the student union to raise their voices and call for immediate detection and deletion of illegal entries in the electoral rolls. The period with protest and rapid resistances ended in signing of the historic Assam Accord of 1985, according to which the basis of the dates of detection and deportation was fixed till 25th March, 1971 to stop further illegal entries. Since the signing of the Accord till the present time, the Accord implementation is a major mystery, deserving more transparency and negotiations in the matter.

The Accord enlist several clauses out of which Clause 5 (relating to foreigner's issue) and Clause 6 (Provision of Constitutional, Administrative and Legislative safeguards for Assamese) has a greater significance in connection with the Citizenship issue. Several bipartite and tripartite talks in relation to the Accord have been timely held by AASU delegates along with government representatives both at the center and state, however with little practicability. The gist of meetings in terms of bipartite and tripartite talks enlisted numerous demands to protect the aspirations of indigenous people and their right to land. Demands for new provision to be included for Assam namely with regards to Art 35 (A) which would grant "special powers to Legislative assemblies of Assam for laws related to employment, property rights, education and many more" is considered a significant negotiating aspect for the union and amongst government both at the state and centre. Similar demands for repealing of Illegal Migrants Determination Act, 1983 along with issuing of Citizenship Cards and securing Indo Bangladesh Borders were made. The remarkable move was made in 2005 under the "Sarbananda Sonowal vs Union of India" case when Supreme court struck down the IMDT Act stating it instead helped the illegal inhabitants to procure false certificates and making their settlement claims legal in the foreign land. The National registry of Citizens (NRC) that was an attempt made to detect and deport foreigners was demanded up gradation status in several discussions held in the presence of AASU.(2005, 2007, 2010) (CAA protests, Citizenship amendment Act, Why is Assam protesting, Economic Times)

The question of why Assam's protest against foreigner's issue requires urgent dealing can be sufficed with certain reasons. Right from the occupation of land to provoking a direct threat for the existent indigenous Assamese identity, the foreigner issue still remains loosely tracked with rapid change of socio-political contexts. The Accord period till the present had witnessed substantial political changes where along with the change of government in power, students affiliation has also altered. With the rapid upturns of the state, the role of students both as protesters and agitators has occupied conscious minds and the union's consistency in keeping the issue of illegal immigration at track been questioned.

While the foreigner's issue remains speculative, enacting an act like Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has appeared deadly for Assam. The CAA,2019 that amends CAB (2015) is an attempt to grant citizenship to six religious communities including the Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhist, Jains, Parsis and Christians from neighboring countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This emerges as a serious question of concern for the state in protecting and providing indigenous safeguards as promised in the Accord Clause (Clause 6). Evaluating the role of students, AASU in this regard sees itself as a guardian in generating public alertness and acting as a bridge for the indigenous concern and space. The CAA movement that got enacted by the Indian Government on 12th of December 2019 allows for acceptance of illegal migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan mainly on religious grounds. The movement which first spearheaded in Assam and later spread to the mainland holds separate bases as the reasons of protest has been different from one another. The fear with regards to the passing of the Citizenship is feared to provoke a complete look alike situation for Assam that happened immediately after

partition. Additionally, the allowance for citizenship and permanent settlement is seen as an attempt to “*swamp indigenous communities, burden their resources and threaten their language, culture and tradition*” Secondly, the constant alteration of cutoff date for immigrants had always been an issue of contention. CAB that proposed 2014 as the cut off year is a total negation of the Assam Accord provision which enlist the cut-off date to be 25th March, 1971. At various occasions AASU representatives have been stating how the state has been bearing the foreigners pressure for twenty long years from 1951 to 1971 and still not been able to attain any suitable negotiations. Moreover, the panic for a second Assam Agitation is non-feasible and is unfair for the indigenous populace of the state. With the promise of opposing the Act till its revoking, the adviser to AASU, Sammujjal Bhattacharjee states that the protest which had received unprecedented solidarity will always thrive till a permanent solution has not been restored for the people of the state.

Thus, the enactment of CAA has brought serious questions of concern amongst the people of Assam. The protest has been gaining space nationwide, howbeit the basis, intensity and involvement of people is varied and diverse.

Ananalysis

Strong Participation: Catering to all sections of people both rural and urban, educated and uneducated the AASU led Anti CAA protest have definitely had a huge mass appeal. Their constant engagement with the common people in making them aware and conscious about the fact the implementation of CAA would be disastrous and provide a threat to the existence of “Axomiyas” has been well received and understood by the people. Additionally, involvement of women leaders at the front of the movement has not only spearheaded the agitation but has shown an appeal and encouraged other women on similar background to show mass solidarity. Recognising the presence of women leaders, housewives and college girls, AASU delegates affirms how participation of women remains a major key to the success of any movement around the globe. Their relentless, nonviolent and disciplined approaches have been acknowledge at various union meetings too. With many hues and cries the active involvement of women in many districts of Assam like Dhemaji, Tinsukia etc. proves women being aware of the foreigner issue and the later consequences it carried to their land. Interviews with many women activist, stated several stands citing the implementation of CAA to be a complete disaster as it would have severe consequences on the entire Assamese community. Their argument rested with the fact that a small state like Assam is already gripped with limited opportunities and resources and thus remains unrecognized by mainland India. Along with that wherein the safety provisions for women and daughter of the land remains unfairly addressed, what assurances can the state have towards the outsiders. Such interruptions promote worries, emotional upturns, betrayal and non-belongingness of the women community that remains rarely addressed and invites for further trouble if CAA is implemented.

Claiming CAA to have a disruptive demographic effect in Assam, the movement also witnessed prominent university students at the forefront attempting to secure their homeland and belongings with the fear of losing opportunities at work and outside. Thus, CAA from the start has remained an inclusive forum encouraging participants from several grounds, from college going girls to female literary activist, from actresses to housewives, all of them termed as the Axomiya Mula Gabhorus, whose cry and agony remained unnoticed on several strands.

Second, with regards to the ideology of the movement a controversial stand persist. While AASUs claim for a peaceful mass protest relying on non-violent principles has remained as priority, instances of violence during the protest and in the form of resistances has been reported too. Thus seeing its consequential prospects, the Union’s attempt to create a movement based on Gandhian ideals remains significant and cannot be ignored. *Third*, The Anti CAA movement widened its ambit and helped assimilation of men and women from both rural and urban sites. Ranasinga, termed as “cultural cacophony” provided another active forum of cultural protest with involvement of artists and actors to join and showcase their mode of protest. Thus, such form of assimilation has widened the political socialization process, and enabled effective participation and decision-making process which are central for any democratic functioning.

Third, the movement against CAA provided a space for discussion of other significant issues into the notice. Apart from the foreigner trouble the Centers neglect towards the NE region and Assam in solving perennial problems like flood, construction of dam and protecting the forest rights of the tribal were also discussed.

Historical analysis from other movements of Assam saw mass participation and involvement too, but were relatively less covered by the media representatives. However the CAA protest is an exemplary attempt in creating a trend shift from being uncovered to a more expressive and gaining matured popularity. Noteworthy to state, the presence of rural illiterates in the movement served as lightning ground providing strength to the movement. An additional distinguishing feature of the movement was its regional appeal and importance. Whereas the breakthrough was stronger in the Upper Assam region, a different involvement was apprehended from other parts of Lower Assam. Reasons of regional disparities in intensity and the kind of protest were many and not all considered it essential or to join the movement directly even if they were aware of the impact.

In democracies like India, people are mostly guided by the free rider issue. In social science, free rider issue is an issue which occurs when there is free availability of actions and services of a communal nature without paying the price for it. The CAA contention for some section emerged as a free issue of spectating instead of participation despite of its consequences in implementation. Ignorance also affected some section of people who remained far from the movement

People's Perception:

The perception of people towards the influential role of AASU is important to analyse when it comes to protest like CAA. Common people's views regarding the role of the union in this regard showcases their faith and dependence on the Union. Moreover, the sustenance of the Union from 1960s till today and with the same vigor and spirit is noteworthy. Interrogating several people regarding the presence of the union for a long period of time, they acknowledge the organization's strong hold on youth and upholding their affinity towards the socio-cultural and economic embryo of the state. However, the controversy that rest with the union's character as apolitical has been questioned occasionally by academicians and media experts. On questioning why the apolitical character of the organization has been questioned very often, AASU takes a stand and admits that although at various AASU has been backing parties carved out of them like Axom Gana Parishad (AGP) in 1985 and now Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) of 2020-21, that has been in context of having concern and a very part of evolving political consciousness as responsible citizens. Their justification also rest with the fact that the absence of a strong oppositional force for Assam has led them to form such parties. However, the stand of other student union remains in contradictions with the goals of AASU. In a conversation with a member of a prominent student union it has been argued that *"Undoubtedly, AASU has a tremendous influence in the entire North eastern region. However, its "big brotherly" attitude and imposition take over almost all issues comprising the state and leave other unions with little take and command on the same"*. Indicative of such statements the ignored role of similar student bodies remains a matter of concern too.

Academicians, that comprise one of the most important section argues AASU to be the strongest student member organization of Assam. They perceive AASU as a source of resolution to problems of people belonging to any community of Assam. However at the same time agreeing to the fact that the Union have a lot more to do when it comes to more collaborative approaches, interactions with other student union of the North Eastern Region is suggested. At the same time the role of the union must not be confined merely to the protection of Assamese but should look over to the fact that no other ethnic community or tribe and their sentiments are being hurt while making demands.

Conclusion

In democracies like India, student politics can be considered as the root towards civil society functioning and democratic strengthening. In a country like India with diverse people and issues, consent and coercion acts as two sides of the coin placing the need of strong bargaining medium to negotiate and compromise. On the question of why a student body like AASU demands special attention, reasons are many. **Firstly**, evolving out of literary body and with that the gradual broadening of its "ambit" to include vital issues of various socio-economic and cultural aspects of Assam have proved in it as challenging and beyond fulfillment. **Second**, the constant effort of AASU and portrayal of being "apolitical" in form and stand have questioned the organization's sanctity from time to time. The formation of regional political parties as occasional trend shift and carved out from the union itself have proved contradictory to its aims and commitment goals. **Third** and the most vital with regards to the proper execution of the Assam Accord as considered to be the "utmost goal" of AASU, have not been a satisfaction to

Assam and Assamese. The Union's long held struggle of more than fifty years in the implementation process have raised speculations amongst learned minds and doubted it with the presence of a strong bureaucratic nexus. **Fourth**, with the Anti CAA protest and a strong leadership of the Union has arisen but question arises in its consistency and constant involvement. However, the subsequent loss of Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) in the state Assembly Elections of 2021 stood as a negation to the entire picture and proved the Unions' challenges to be more hefty. **Fifth**, the general perception for the ever thought organization to be embracing "indigenous safety valve" has somewhere loosened its wider networking's and base after the post covid scenario. Thus the greater challenge that surrounds the union pose a rebirth of emotional entitlement of the people along with active consciousness.

Hence such occasional trend shifts affects the organizational, constitutional and functional aspects of the union as the strongest pressure group of the state and demands further academic attention, analysis and scrutiny.

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